

*From the Dubuque Telegraph Herald, Mar 10, 2011*

***Congressman, back from a trip to Afghanistan, says top commanders praised 'Red Bulls' and others.***

Two of America's top soldiers in Afghanistan gave high marks to Iowa soldiers serving in the country.

U.S. Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Iowa, returned earlier this week from a congressional fact-finding mission to Afghanistan, where he met with Gen. David Petraeus and other top commanders. Braley recalled conversations with Petraeus and Maj. Gen. John F. Campbell, commander of the Army's 101st Airborne Division.

"General Petraeus was gracious, and said kind things," he said. "Campbell had great things to say about the work being done by the 'Red Bulls.' "

More than 3,100 soldiers are serving with Iowa Army National Guard's 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 34th (Red Bull) Infantry Division in Afghanistan. Braley shared the comments of the generals with Col. Ben Corell, the 2nd BCT commander, and others.

"They were quite moved to hear that," he said.

Braley also met with Iowa Marines at Camp Leatherneck, a base located in Helmand province. He reported they were in good spirits -- despite the demanding nature of their jobs.

"It's hard and dangerous work, and they take great pride in it," Braley said. "By all accounts, Helmand province is much safer since the Marines have been there. They have a lot of affection for the Afghan people, and they're providing 'boots on ground' diplomacy."

Braley learned al-Qaida is not a threat in Afghanistan, with at most somewhere in the neighborhood of 10 to 30 operatives in the country. The biggest threat continues to be Taliban and Haqqani insurgencies. The Taliban were toppled following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"One of the things Gen. Petraeus said was our approach in Afghanistan was never marginally right until last fall," Braley said, pointing out the general began overhauling the war plan when he arrived in the country last year. "We've got the right people, a concentrated approach and the right reasons to get the job done."

However, he said the military is not a solution to Afghanistan's problems.

"We have to sustain their long-term security efforts and rebuild their economy," Braley said. "Big questions remain."

One problem is that the country is plagued by a high illiteracy rate -- more than 55 percent of Afghan males are illiterate, Braley said. It equates to difficulty in trying to train the country's security forces, he noted.

Despite the challenges ahead, Braley left the country upbeat.

"I couldn't be prouder of all of our troops," he said. "These are amazing young men and women from Iowa, a long way from home, making great sacrifices to benefit our country."

